DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 205 CS 210 644

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TITLE Media-Sponsored Opinion Polls: A Critical Review of Campaign '84 and Recommendations for Campaign '88.
PUB DATE 2 Aug 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (70th, San Antonio, TX, August 1-4, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Codes of Ethics; Comparative Analysis; Evaluation Criteria; Mass Media Effects; Media Research; News Media; *Newspapers; News Reporting; *Periodicals; Political Attitudes; *Presidential Campaigns (United States); *Public Opinion; *Television
IDENTIFIERS *Media Analysis; Media Role; Newsmagazines; *Opinion Polls

ABSTRACT

Noting that the 1984 presidential campaign was the most heavily polled election in United States history, a study examined the use and abuse of opinion polls by five print media ("Newsweek," "Time," "U.S. News and World Report," the "New York Times," and the "Washington Post") and by the three major television networks during the campaign. In particular, the study examined to what extent these eight influential media followed sound practices, as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), in the reporting of the opinion polls they themselves commissioned and over which they exercised control. The AAPOR code for reporting public opinion polls includes the following items: (1) identity of who sponsored the survey, (2) exact wording of the questions asked, (3) definition and size of the population sampled, (4) indication of what allowance should be made for sampling error, (5) which results are based on part of the sample, (6) whether interviewing was done personally, by telephone, by mail, etc., and (7) timing of the interviewing. It was found that all the news media were deficient in following AAPOR standards in some respects, and some were deficient in most respects. While there was no clear winner among the three categories of media, network television was a clear loser. On every comparison among the three categories of media, the networks were more negligent than were the newspapers and news magazines. The findings suggest a number of recommendations for improved polling performance in the 1988 campaign. (References are appended.) (NKA)

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Media-Sponsored Opinion Polls:

A Critical Review of Campaign '84 and Recommendations for Campaign '88

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Presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (Mass Communication and Society Division), San Antonio, Texas, August 2, 1987.

CS 210644

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ABSTRACT

Media-Sponsored Opinion Polls:

A Critical Review of Campaign '84 and Recommendations for Campaign '88

Campaign '84 was the most heavily polled election in this nation's history. This paper examines the use and abuse of opinion polls by five prestige print media (Newsweek, Time, U.S. News & World Report, The New York Times, and The Washington Post) and by the three major TV networks during Campaign '84. In particular, it examines to what extent these eight influential media followed sound practices (as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research) in the reporting of the opinion polls they themselves commissioned and over which they exercised control. All of the news media were deficient in following the AAPOR standards in some respects, and some of them were deficient in most respects. While there was no clear winner among the three categories of media, there was a clear loser: network TV. On every comparison between the three categories of media, the networks were more negligent than were the newspapers and news magazines. Recommendations are made for improved press performance in Campaign '88.

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Media-Sponsored Opinion Polls:
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At the end of the 1984 presidential campaign, a Newsweek writer (Alpern, 1984b:8) commented on the use of opinion polls by the mass media:

> Never had a presidential campaign been so bombarded by the political polls, a blizzard of statistics---leads, gaps, strengths and weaknesses---gushing daily from the computers of independent polling firms and the news media. And with profusion came confusion . . . .

This paper will examine the use and abuse of opinion polls by five prestige print media (Newsweek, Time, U.S. News & World Report, The New York Times, and The Washington Post) and by the three major TV networks during Campaign '84. In particular, it will examine to what extent these eight influential media followed sound practices in the reporting of the opinion polls they themselves commissioned and over which they exercised control. To the extent that there were abuses during Campaign '84, what lessons might be learned that could lead to an improved use of opinion polls by the media during Campaign '88?

All too often, as Wheeler (1976:xvi-xvii) has written, "The reader of opinion polls is given no hint that they may not be trustworthy. The press in particular has been oblivious to the pitfalls of polling." Political scientist David L. Palitz and his colleagues (1980:499) stated, "The press seems obsessed with presidential elections, willing to publish polls on the subject no matter how irrelevant and inane."

The AAPOR Standards

Normally, when evaluating mass media performance, one of the first problems is determining which criteria to use. Against which standards should the media be judged? And who says so? When it comes to evaluating news media reporting of political polls, however, the problem is considerably reduced. In 1968 the American Association for Public Opinion Research published its "Standards for Reporting Public Opinion Polls." The AAPOR code called upon the print media and broadcast media to report the following eight pieces of information when reporting opinion polls (Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970:134-135):

1. Identity of who sponsored the survey.
2. The exact wording of questions asked.
3. A definition of the population actually sampled.
4. Size of sample . . . .
5. An indication of what allowance should be made for sampling error.
6. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than the total sample, for example, likely voters only, those aware of an event, those who answered other questions in a certain way, and the like.
7. Whether interviewing was done personally, by telephone, by mail, or on street corners.
8. Timing of the interviewing . . . .

Some critical observers of polls, however, say that the eight points contained in the AAPOR standards are not enough. They believe that the media have an obligation to inform readers that polls are subject to additional sources of error above and beyond sampling error. Wheeler (1976:103) states, for example, that news consumers need to be better informed as to

what actually goes on behind the scenes in polling.

> In sum, though the theory of polling is scientifically sound, the actual practice is not . . . . Polling is not the pristinely pure scientific process the pollsters want us to believe it is . . . . But as serious as these technical problems are, as suspicious of polls as they should make us, they are not the only source of polling error. The fundamental problem of polls lies in their analysis.

And it is this type of warning, says Wheeler, that the news media usually do not report.

Pollster Burns W. Roper (1980:46) also believes that the news media frequently mislead readers, viewers and listeners---not by the facts they report, but by implication:

> Partly because of their lack of deep expertise, reporters have overstressed sampling error and understressed the other more important and considerably greater sources of error. And, in the process of stressing sampling error, they have not warned the reader or viewer of error as they have intended. Instead they have implied an unwarranted degree of accuracy.

Wheeler (1980:44) states, "It should be at least as important to alert editors---and their readers---to the wide range of possible interpretation as it is to note sampling error. Indeed, the standard warning about a 3 or 4 point chance variation doubtlessly misleads some readers into believing that the whole report is valid to that degree."

Applying the Standards

The primary purpose of this critical analysis is straightforward. It is to examine all of

the polls sponsored and published by eight prestige news media during Campaign '84 to evaluate to what extent they adhered to the AAPOR standards.[1] The secondary purpose is to analyze the news reports to determine what additional cautionary information---beyond the points recommended by AAPOR---readers were given to help them understand that polling is more art than science.

The time period covered by this critical review was from August 27, 1984 (four days after the Republican national convention ended) through November 5, 1984 (the day before the election). The news magazine poll articles were located by reading all of the issues published during the study period. Articles in The New York Times and The Washington Post were located with the help of the official index published by each paper. The network TV polls were located by searching the Television News Index and Abstracts, and video tapes of the network poll stories were then obtained from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

The New York Times and CBS, which jointly sponsored some of their polls, were the leaders in terms of the total number of poll stories published (nine each). The Washington Post and ABC, which likewise jointly sponsored some of their polls, were not far behind, with seven and eight poll stories, respectively. Since the news magazines publish only one issue per week, one would not expect them to publish as many poll stories as the daily media, and this indeed was the case. The totals for Newsweek, Time and U.S. News were four, two and one stories, respectively. NBC, with its total of two poll stories, gave much less emphasis to poll stories than all of the other daily media.

SPONSOR IDENTIFICATION

Because of the scope of this analysis, all of the media automatically rated highly in this

respect since, in effect, they were all publishing their own polls. Not only did they identify themselves as being the sponsors of the polls, in some cases they also reported the name of the polling organization: Newsweek used Gallup, Time used Yankelovich, U.S. News used Civic Service, Inc. Sponsor identification was simply not a problem for these eight prestige media during Campaign '84.

QUESTION WORDING

Everyone who has ever taken a true/false or multiple choice exam knows that changing a single word in the question can completely change the answer or results. Thus, even without the AAPOR standards, it should be intuitively obvious to reporters and editors that readers and viewers need to know the exact wording of the questions asked in opinion polls if they are to meaningfully interpret the results.

One of the biggest problem areas uncovered in this analysis was that of the nonreporting of the verbatim questions asked in the surveys. Of the total of 42 poll stories only six provided all of the verbatim questions, and another seven provided some of the verbatim questions. Newsweek and U.S. News were the only bright spots in this otherwise bleak picture. In the four separate polls published by Newsweek, all (or almost all) of the questions referred to in the report were presented verbatim. In fact, the Newsweek format of grouping the key questions in a box, with the questions in regular type and the responses and percentages in boldface type, could serve as an excellent model for other print media to follow.

The one poll published by U.S. News did report the verbatim questions and, like the Newsweek polls, could serve as a model for other print media to follow. Time magazine's two polls did a generally poor job of reporting verbatim questions; one poll reported some of the key

questions and the other reported none.

The New York Times and The Washington Post did worse than the news magazines in terms of reporting verbatim questions. The Times provided all or most of the verbatim questions in only one of its nine polls, and reported at least one verbatim question in three other poll reports. In the five remaining reports, readers were provided with no verbatim questions. The Washington Post provided no verbatin questions in six of its poll stories and some of the questions in one story.

ABC, CBS and NBC did not carry a single poll story that provided viewers all of the relevant verbatim questions. Two of their 19 poll stories provided some of the verbatim questions, but the other 17 stories totally neglected this information.

POPULATIONS DEFINED

Exactly half of the newspaper poll stories (eight out of 16) defined their survey populations. The figure for magazines was two out of seven, and the networks provided this information in four out of 19 poll stories. The two worst records were those of Time (zero out of two) and CBS (one out of eight). Thus, in 28 of the 42 polls the public was given percentages relating to Campaign '84 but was not given an adequate description of the people the numbers were supposed to represent.

The scores in this area would have been higher if the media would have provided a geographic portion of the definition. For example, simply stating "registered voters" was counted as not adequately defining the population, but "registered voters nationwide" was considered an adequate definition. Therefore, while the missing information is fundamental in terms of the AAPOR standards, this particular problem would be easy for the media to remedy if

they desire to do so.

SAMPLE SIZES

All of the print media except the New York Times received perfect scores in their reporting of the sample sizes of their surveys, and the omission on the part of the Times affected only one poll story. The networks neglected this basic information in six of 19 poll stories. The worst offender was ABC, which reported the sample size in only half of its eight reports.

INTERVIEWING METHODS

The news magazines did a good job of reporting their interviewing methods, with the single omission being by U.S. News. The newspapers reported this information in 12 of 16 poll stories, but the networks once again did poorly. In fact, ABC and NBC rated a zero in providing this information to their viewers, and CBS reported the interviewing methods in five out of nine stories.

TIMING

From the standpoint of reporting the dates of their surveys, all of the print media received an almost perfect score. The lone exception was one survey published by the New York Times. Even this exception was a minor one, however, because the story did report the date the interviewing ended; the reader simply had no way of knowing when the interviewing began. As was the case with all of the above comparisons, the performance of the TV networks was not as good. Seven of their 19 poll stories did not provide complete information about the dates of the polling. For example, on October 4, ABC reported that they had "just finished conducting" a

poll. This type of description of timing was not considered acceptable because no indication was given concerning the number days or weeks over which the polling was done. Was it done during the last three days or during the last three weeks? This type of information is important in any election campaign, where the results of even a single event or debate can quickly influence people's opinions.

SAMPLING ERROR

Overall, exactly two-thirds of all of the polls reported by these prestige media included specific information about sampling error (28 out of 42). The news magazines had the best record by including this information in six out of seven poll stories. The performance of the newspapers was second best (11 out of 16) and, in keeping with the entire pattern described above, the performance of the TV networks was worst (11 out of 19). In other words, in eight of their 19 poll stories (two on ABC, four on CBS, and two on NBC), the viewing audience was presented with percentages of how Reagan, Mondale, Bush and Ferarro were doing, but was not given any indication of the margins of error, a clear violation of the AAPOR standards.

Beyond Sampling Error

To what extent did these major media voices provide their readers and viewers with other cautionary information beyond the minima recommended by AAPOR? Only one of the news magazine stories gave its readers any indication that there are other possible sources of error that can bias or invalidate a poll. In this one instance, Newsweek's Alpern (1984a:33) did imply this by pointing out to readers that a particular sample was ". . . a somewhat more Reagan-prone audience than the electorate at large . . . ." Likewise, only one network poll story

implied this. ABC stated in its October 8th newscast, "Those we polled were more Republican and more pro-Reagan than registered voters in general." The implication of this admission is that the sample may have been biased and viewers should take this into consideration. The two newspapers did a much better job in this respect, with The New York Times providing cautionary information in five of its nine polls and The Washington Post doing so in three out of seven poll reports.

An interesting finding concerning The New York Times is that, even though it failed to provide readers with one of the most basic forms of information, the verbatim questions asked in five of its six surveys, it provided other relevant information that only a sophisticated poll watcher would be likely to appreciate:

* It reported the Reagan/Mondale preference statistics two ways: with "leaning" voters included and with them excluded.
* It explained that the statistical results were weighted to reflect the liklihood of voting.
* It explained how the telephone exchanges were sampled.
* It defined "probable electorate."
* It gave the name and academic affiliation of its polling consultant.
* It provided historical context from earlier polls---whether from earlier 1984 polls or from past presidential elections.
* In one poll that involved reinterviews with respondents polled the previous week, it explained that the sampling error on the repeated questions was less than one percent, while it was four percent on the new questions.

A similar point can be made with respect to some of the polls published by The Washington Post. Some of the Post stories included:

* Comparative data from earlier Post polls for context.
* Comparative data from other current polls (Gallup, Harris, etc.) for context.
* A statement (Sussman, 1984:A4) that, "Census Bureau figures for age, sex, race and education were used to adjust the sample slightly so that it matches the general population in those characteristics."
* An acknowledgement that the margins of error for some smaller states were higher than the margins for bigger states.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Campaign '88

The major conclusion from this analysis is that all of the news media were deficient in following the AAPOR standards in some respects, and some of them were deficient in most respects. Out of this conclusion comes a rather obvious recommendation---namely, that these influential news sources need to conduct in-service training courses for all of their reporters and editors who work on political stories. It's not enough to have a special polling consultant available, even though this in itself is desirable, because with the pressures and short deadlines that are the norm during a campaign there is simply not enough time to call in the consultant. While the front-line reporters and editors do not necessarily need to become specialists in the development of questionnaires and in sampling theory and methods, they should at least be knowledgeable in the AAPOR standards. They need to know what the standards are and why they matter.

While there was no clear winner among the three categories of media, there was a clear loser: network TV. Even though the number of polls was relatively small and does not lend itself to formal statistical testing, the overall pattern that emerges is quite clear. On every comparison between the three categories of media, the networks were more negligent than were the newspapers and news magazines.

All observers and critics of network TV news are aware of the extreme time limitations (about 23 minutes of actual news time per broadcast) under which they operate. Nevertheless, this time limitation alone does not account for the superficiality of much of their poll coverage---because they spend a considerable amount of time reporting various fluff stories about crowds, crowd control, parades, signs held by people in the crowds, and other interesting but non-essential items.

Furthermore, it does not take that much time to report most of the essential details. The following statement by Newsweek's Alpern (1984a:33), for example, would take about 22 seconds to read on the air and contains six essential points from the AAPOR standards (sponsor, date, method of polling, sample size, population, margin of error):

> For this Newsweek Poll, the Gallup Organization on Sunday night telephoned 379 registered voters who watched the debate. They were drawn from a pool of respondents in the latest Gallup poll who said they planned to watch, and who closely reflected the national sample in demographics, party affiliation and candidate support. The margin of error is plus or minus 7 percentage points.

Thus it seems to be more a case of ignorance, rather than a lack of time, that accounts for the networks' deficiency. In fact, even the Newsweek statement could be shortened. The word

"nationwide" could be inserted after the word "voters" in the first sentence, and the second sentence, while commendable, could be eliminated. The margin of error could be shown on the screen as "Margin of Error: ± 7%" and not have to be read. The slightly revised first sentence would then take about eight seconds for the correspondent to read. The wording of each question could then either be superimposed on the screen or read by the correspondent.

Even though CBS and the other networks were deficient in much of their poll reporting, CBS should be praised for a story it carried on October 26th which was not a poll story per se, but was a story about election polls in general. This was a long story by TV standards (four and a half minutes), and included interviews with various polling experts. It particularly addressed the question of why different polls come up with different results, and it pointed out that one of the reasons is that they use different methods of statistical weighting for likely voters.

Another criticism of the network TV reporting is that, even when the margins of error were shown on the screen, the graphics were so visually cluttered---with such things, as stars, stripes, donkeys, elephants, the percentages being reported, and so on---that probably 99 people out of a hundred would not notice the tiny ±3% in the corner of the screen. Furthermore, without the words "margin of error" also on the screen, or without the correspondent calling attention to the margin of error, presumably very few viewers would get the intended message. ABC was the worst offender in terms of hiding the margin of error statistic in the cluttered graphics. Since the networks are supposed to be in the business of effective communication, all of them should conduct some applied research projects prior to Campaign '88 to come up with their own simplified, standardized graphics for reporting poll results. Unless the networks choose to have the correspondent read the margin of error information, the information should be presented in a manner that is easily seen and read by the

audience.

U.S. News & World Report deserves to be strongly criticized for its misuse of the terms "survey" in four different issues. In its October 8th issue (Mashek, 1984a:25) the magazine referred to "A U.S. News & World Report survey conducted in late September . . .", and stated that this was the "First in a Series of Regional Surveys." In one issue (Mashek, 1984b:57) the misnomer "Second in a Series of Regional Surveys" in one part of the magazine was especially egregious because there was a legitimate survey earlier in the magazine.

Two recommendations come to mind. First, people who work with words for a living should be more careful with the words they use. In particular, journalists should not use the terms "survey" and "poll" when they are referring to reporters' informal roundups of people's views. Second, AAPOR should have a procedure whereby members who spot such abuse should immediately notify a designated AAPOR spokesman who would contact the offending media organization and request a clarification for readers, listeners or viewers. In the case of U.S. News, the abuse went on for four consecutive weeks and was probably not intentional, but simply due to ignorance about polling terms.

Even if the media did a much better job of reporting the eight pieces of information specified by the AAPOR standards, is there a need for additional changes in the way they report polls? To this critic, the answer is a resounding "Yes." The biggest problem that is easily correctable is the false impression that even well-reported poll stories give---namely, that if the margin of error is ±3% or ±4%, then the results are trustworthy to that extent. As several pollsters and critics of polls have pointed out, the margin of error reflects only sampling error. "The fundamental problem of polls lies in their analysis" (Wheeler, 1976:103). "And in the process of stressing sampling error, they have not warned the reader or viewer of error as they

have intended. Instead they have implied an unwarranted degree of accuracy" (Roper, 1980:46).

While it may take years to communicate this point fully to working journalists, there is a simple place to begin. AAPOR should revise its standards so that news reports of polls inform readers about possible additional sources of error. Sudman (1983:495) wrote that the media should include the following two sentences in their news reports of polls:

1. These results do not necessarily reflect the views of people who refused to be interviewed or could not be found at home during the time the survey was done.
2. Changing the wording or context of some questions might change the results.

To its credit, the New York Times (Rosenbaum, 1984:B9) included the following statement in some of its poll stories: "In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll." Likewise, the Washington Post (Sussman, 1984:A4) should also be praised for including this statement in some of its poll stories: "That does not take into account other, nonsampling errors that may occur in opinion polling."

Media-sponsored opinion polls are here to stay, but the deficiencies do not have to be here to stay. The reporting of opinion polls in Campaign '88 can be significantly better than in Campaign '84 if AAPOR members, media executives, and working reporters and editors will recognize the past problems and become more informed and involved.

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Footnote

[1] For the same reasons stated by Miller and Hurd (1982:245), this analysis did not deal with the AAPOR standard of which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than the total sample. In addition, it is difficult to evaluate most poll stories on this criterion without having access to the original poll data.